I Killed Something Awful

by Don Jolly

At some point, inevitably, a history of trolling will be written. Only it won't be the trolls that write it.

When I say "trolling" here, I refer not just to the practice of recreationally pissing people off on the Internet, a practice so widespread and simple that everybody who posts engages in it from time to time, but rather the weird culture of shitposting whose length and breadth goes from Gamergate to Project Chanology to Million Dollar Extreme to the election of Donald Trump. These trolls, posting anonymously or pseudonymously, have drawn the attention and ire of politicians across the globe, been portrayed dramatically (if inaccurately) by Hollywood, and have insinuated themselves into the pantheon of the 21st century cultural types. The gay nineties had dudes and dandies, the sixties had hippies and John Birchers, the eighties had metal heads and yuppies, and the 2000s - for better or worse - have hipsters and trolls.

In spite of this prominence, however, trolls remain a strangely faceless archetype. They have avatars, not faces. If we think anything about their physical existence at all, we think they are unhealthy, unhygienic, miserable, white, and male. Everything else about them vanishes into a miasma of obscurity. Since the trolls are largely uninterested in providing an honest accounting of themselves, it will most likely be their opponents who get the historical last word. The reason for this, I think, is a fundamental mismatch of agendas. The people trolls make fun of aspire to treat the Internet as a community; a social construct with codified etiquette and a concern for the common good of the like-minded members of its polity. It is debatable, of course, whether the forum moderators or diligent fetishists committed to stable Internet society have succeeded in building communities worthy of esteem - but their objective is to build communities on the digital frontier. A troll's objective is to laugh at people for "building communities on the digital frontier" because "building communities on the digital frontier" is, they believe, bullshit. It's no accident that troll culture is inseparable from the technical side of the Internet. While most lay users see the Internet as a place ("cyberspace" if you want to use outdated terminology), trolls see it as a manipulable mechanism. An argument could be made that trolling, as a practice, is just a particularly despondent form of cultural hacking. That's certainly how many of them see it.

I feel justified in summarizing the view of trolls in general because I am a troll myself. I've been in this subculture for more than 20 years and I've met many of its luminaries in person. The common perception is right about a few things. A lot of us are huge white guys with curly hair. Not just fat, although we are often fat. Big. I've met a disconcerting number of trolls that are as tall and malformed as their mythological namesakes. And while many of them were white, many were not. There are Asian trolls, Mexican trolls, Black trolls. And while the majority are, in fact, male, there's a good solid 20 percent who aren't - and that's without getting into the significant chunk that's transgender. A lot of them are furries, too. Many do have bad hygiene, though. They got us there.

Only a small portion of trolls are so online that it's eaten every other aspect of their lives, although most make their living on computers in one way or another. Most of them, in my experience, are people who live complex and multifaceted lives in the real world and who, for whatever reason, like to fuck with people online. They'll never write their own history because most trolls are really only trolls a tiny fraction of the time and it's not the part of themselves they want etched into posterity.

I freely admit that a comprehensive history of the troll subculture is a project that exceeds both my interest in the topic and my ability to research it. That said, I do think someone should make an effort to describe the world of trolls from the inside while the memories are still fresh. This article is an effort to describe not trolling in general but one particular troll which occurred in the Fall of 2013. It is the story of how I, in a post of three letters, destroyed one of the most popular Internet forums of the 2000s.

I killed Something Awful. This is how:

Like most things on the modern Internet, the trolling subculture can be traced back to the once-popular vBulletin forums hosted on SomethingAwful.com. *Something Awful* was a comedy website launched in 1998 by Rich "Lowtax" Kyanka. His comedy was mean and absurd. Every post on the site's front page came equipped with an "Awful Link of the Day," a website or community of people Lowtax would relentlessly mock for being idiots or freaks. The *Something Awful* forums shared this interest.

At least for the first few years of the site, a good percentage of forum posts were also concerned with mocking other online communities or individuals. In the early days, around the turn of the century, there was the megalomaniacal *Doom* mapper King REoL. In 2004, there was a poor woman who took posed photographs of her stillborn babies and uploaded them to her website and to whom a writer for *Something Awful* said: "Your poison womb is making heaven too fucking crowded." Then, in 2007, there was Chris Chan. The "most documented person in human history" started being documented because she was noticed by the SA forums. If you don't know how the rest of the story goes, there's a 78 hour long video essay by GenoSamuel on YouTube available to fill you in. The modern troll subculture is just a steady evolution of *Something Awful's* original remit: using the Internet to laugh at the Internet.

I started posting on *Something Awful* in 2000 or 2001. I was either 12 or 13. I was briefly a moderator for one of their creative boards in high school, but I found the volunteer job boring and was unceremoniously ejected for inactivity. None of my posts really found traction and even the most successful of them are totally forgotten today. I dipped in and out of the forums for years. From 2009 until 2012 I didn't look at them at all. In the meantime, I graduated high school and college, worked a series of flunky clerk jobs (and, for a while, as a film projectionist), and chased fame by making short films and selling ink drawings. I made some webcomics, racked up some views on 2007 YouTube, and generally puttered away in creative obscurity. In 2012, I left my home in Texas for New York. On paper, I was going to graduate school. But, really, I was going because I thought New York - being home to all the big magazines and publishing houses - would work some alchemical miracle and turn me from a (largely) unpublished hobbyist into a real, bonafide, deadline-and-paycheck writer. It worked.

I started my first staff job at a magazine in the fall of 2013. They had offices on Broadway and everything. I even got my own office for a while, although it was windowless and I hated having to ride the elevator down to the street to smoke. In October of 2013, a few days before Halloween, I was working late in the editorial office - revising a piece to hit a deadline. While I worked, I tabbed back and forth between my research and the *Something Awful* forums.

When I arrived in New York, I didn't know anyone. There were a barren few months when I hardly saw anyone at all, socially, and this boredom and isolation brought me back to the forums. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* was on Netflix. When I wasn't studying, I watched it. And I posted in *Something Awful's* "Star Trek" thread.

When I registered my 2012 account, mastershitter, I was returning to the forums after four years of absence. I wasn't entirely pleased. The spontaneity and meanness of the old boards had been replaced with a collection of cornball behavioral norms predicated on using SA's targeted meanness against "the right people." Who the "right people" were was open to limited debate, but it disturbed me that it seemed to be a political question. There were less jokes and less Internet anthropology threads. There were, however, more subjects for anthropological study. The forums were full of people that practically posted under their real names and detailed behaviors that, six years before, would have earned them a spot on the "Awful Link of the Day." There was the huge thread on Ketogenic diets where people bragged about eating breadless bacon cheeseburgers for every meal. There was a massive thread where obvious virgins broke down the method for making pocket change publishing junk erotica to Amazon, most of it focused on themes of rape, beastiality, or wink-wink-nudge-nudge child abuse. Worst of all was the heroin thread on the dedicated drug sub-forum, the "Crackhead Clubhouse." It was full of articulate, multi-paragraph posts from "functional addicts" about the theory and practice of using heroin in daily life. These posters would come in, dominate for a month or two, and then disappear. Eventually it would filter back to the heroin thread that they had died of an overdose. Sad emoticons all around.

The "Star Trek" thread was the least-worst sector I could find; an anodyne gathering place of nerds. The moderator for the "Television" sub-forum was active in it. His name was Aatrek. I thought he was a little annoying but, as moderators go, he wasn't that bad. Then, in the fall of 2013, someone on an offsite forum for disgruntled *Something Awful* expatriates found out that Aatrek was in the sex offender registry for abusing a prepubescent girl he'd been hired to babysit. By that time, I had some friends in the city and no longer needed the forums as a time-waster. I also felt disgusted with them; they'd become, I thought, the kind of freak show *Something Awful* used to make its bones on tearing apart. I started posting in "Fuck You and Die," the trolling sub-forum. Since I no longer cared about my account, I started thinking about what I could do with it: what I could post to cause some havoc. SA

accounts cost ten bucks and I aimed to get my money's worth.

Why did I think this way? I'm still not sure. Oscar Wilde said that there's nothing more ridiculous than the emotions of those we have ceased to love. And while I never exactly loved *Something Awful,* I certainly found it to be ridiculous, toxic, and after the Aatrek thing, perhaps even evil. I wanted to see its laughable pretensions punctured, its functional cultural machinery in ruins. I felt the same thing in 2016 about America in general. Which is why I, like most trolls, voted for Trump.

It's hate. That's the feeling. I can't explain it any deeper than that. I wasn't angry or upset. Those feelings tend to arise more out of anxiety for me. But hate, calm and dispassionate, delights in arousing the passions of others.

My opportunity came that night in 2013, a few days before Halloween. While I was sitting in that office, ten stories above Broadway, and while the light was failing in the highest windows and the traffic snarled down below, I tabbed to an offsite forum and found a post where someone claimed to have information that proved the rest of the *Something Awful* moderators knew about Aatrek and actively hid his pedophile activities. I thought that was pretty good, so I copied it and posted a thread on *Something Awful's* general board. I was banned almost immediately, but the thread stayed active.

It grew to five pages, then ten, then 20. Posters scoured my history and found out I'd admitted to being a moderator in the past. They thought I had inside information. They thought that by banning me, the mods were preventing the truth from coming to light. They started posting a single phrase, over and over. "Mods knew."

I registered on the offsite forum and had a good laugh. I did a little more revision on my magazine article. When the work was finished and the sun had gone down, I stayed at the office while the cleaners did their work. The thread I'd posted was growing exponentially. People demanded I be allowed to come back and post my "proof." Eventually, one of the moderators from SA reached out to me on the offsite. My account was reactivated. The mod then reported my thread, which continued to grow. I waited ten minutes and then logged into my SA account. People in the thread noticed I was online and speculated that I must be typing out my "proof." I stayed logged in and inactive for half an hour. Trolling, like any performance art, requires showmanship. And the essence of showmanship is timing.

When I felt I had waited long enough, I made my much-anticipated post. It was three letters: "lol."

The thread went nuts. Someone posted "terrorists win." I was banned, they were banned, everyone was banned. On Halloween, the moderators of SA suspended the rules on its general board. The whole place turned into an orgy of trolling and shitposting directed against itself. This regime, "GBS 2.0," is apparently infamous today. But I didn't see it. I had a new city to live in, a new job to do, and other lives to live. I still haven't returned to the SA forums. I moved on to the offsite expat board, then the Chans. I sometimes wonder how many "radicalized" Internet trolls followed the same trajectory. If I had to guess, I'd say it's a lot of them.

A few weeks ago, I found a Twitter account (I'll call it X when anyone else does) called @SAunderscoremoment. It details weird episodes from the long history of *Something Awful.* In the opinion of the account's learned administrator, the suspension of rules on Halloween of 2013 killed *Something Awful.* After it, new account registrations and activity experienced a precipitous decline that the site still hasn't recovered from. Before my troll, *Something Awful* was one of the big boys of the Internet. Afterwards, it was a niche holdover from the turn of the century. "A move that was supposed to usher in a new era of growth instead utterly cratered the site's reputation and its growth along with it," writes SAunderscoremoment.

In my head, my little thread caused the rules suspension. There were certainly people on the offsite forum who agreed with me. I thought it was funny, a good troll. I didn't know until recently that it might have had such a big impact.

It's always weird thinking about the effects of Internet shitposts. No single post does much. Their power exists in aggregate. So when it comes to who gets the credit for "killing" *Something Awful,* the situation is a little light-as-a-feather-stiff-as-a-board. Who knows who's really doing the lifting, and in what amount?

But if the Internet is a frontier, albeit a digital one, don't those old frontier maxims still apply? When it comes down to the truth or the legend, print the legend. So, for my part, that's what I'm choosing to do.

I killed *Something Awful.* And why? I could say I did it out of a righteous hatred of pedophiles or because I'm a master manipulator of discourse. But that's bullshit too onerous to qualify as "legend." The truth is I did it for the same reason Internet trolls do anything:

I was bored and it was funny.

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